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## Five Keys to Success

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prosperes through  
challenging times**

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# Five Keys to Success

**Doetsch Industrial gets through challenging times with a business approach based on solid core values**

By Carol Brzozowski

**H**ow does a family owned industrial vacuum and cleaning company survive recessions, depressions and economic changes for more than a century? Simply by changing with the times when others don't want to admit that times are changing.

Such is the philosophy of Joe Schotthoefer, operations manager for Doetsch Industrial Services in Warren, Mich. Joe represents the fifth generation to operate the company, which began in 1898 and is now owned by the third generation, Frank Doetsch (Joe's grandfather).

The company, with 40 employees, started in plumbing and heating and evolved into sewer cleaning. The firm later phased out plumbing and heating in favor of serving Detroit's automotive market, primarily with hydraulic sewer cleaning.

Soon after, the company added industrial vacuuming, pipe inspection, waterjetting and hydroexcavating. It now services utilities, manufacturing plants, foundries, chemical plants, refineries and municipal clients throughout southeastern Michigan, and in more distant places at clients' request.

Doetsch Industrial runs a successful operation based on five key factors:

- Full customer satisfaction through superior service
- Safe workplaces
- Cost competitiveness
- High employee involvement
- Continuous improvement

## CUSTOMER SERVICE

Doetsch management monitors shrinking opportunities in the Detroit area and reacts accordingly. "Before, when we were heavily automotive-based, our biggest profit centers were the most inefficient plants," says Joe. "They needed us to come in every day and clean something because it didn't work or their machines were faulty."

While that enabled the company to build up business, an economic downturn forced automakers to jettison outdated machinery, outsource work to other states or countries, and cut services. At the same time, newcomers with money — but not necessarily with skills — bought equipment to go head-to-head with companies like Doetsch. Today, says Joe, the challenge is to take

**"YOU CAN BUY A HOST OF SAFETY DEVICES, BUT IF YOU DON'T HAVE PEOPLE WHO ARE WILLING TO OBSERVE CHANGING JOB CONDITIONS AND MAKE CHANGES, THOSE DEVICES ARE IRRELEVANT."**

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a machine or tool and use it to serve customers in ways that demonstrate that Doetsch is superior.

Joe starts by developing long-term business relationships and keying on customer needs. As a result, customers can call on Doetsch for an umbrella of services, instead of working with several contractors.

By listening to customers, the company has picked up new ideas, such as how to tailor equipment to specific needs. Some new ideas don't even require capital investment. For example, Doetsch color-codes its CCTV inspection reports to client specifications. "It's color-coded to a link break, infiltration or whatever they are looking for," says Joe. "When they see color in the bound report, they instantly know they have a problem without spending much time looking for it. It's not difficult to do, but it's something they find very helpful as a time savers."

The company focuses on accommodating clients instead of cutting prices. Price-cutting, says Joe, "may



Doetsch Industrial team members use a combination truck to jet a 36-inch sewer line.

## Profile

### Doetsch Industrial Services Warren, Mich.

Owner: Frank Doetsch

Years in Business: 107

Employees: 40

Service area: Southeast Michigan

Services: Industrial vacuuming, hydroexcavation, pneumatic conveyance, industrial and sewer cleaning, waterblasting

Affiliations: American Public Works Association, Michigan Rural Water Association

Web site: [www.doetschindustrial.com](http://www.doetschindustrial.com)





## Vacuum Specialty

Doetsch Industrial Services calls industrial vacuuming its “main artery of waste handling.” The company’s four Vactor units, model years 1993 to 1997, have served admirably. The units deliver vacuum up to 18 inches Hg and air flow to 6,000 cfm.

The company’s primary clients on the vacuum side are two of the Big Three automakers. The units handle a variety of jobs, including the cleaning of pits. The company’s maintenance crew keeps on top of the fleet, modifying the trucks as necessary to meet client needs.

Joe Schotthoefer, operations manager, says the company’s goal is to provide versatility that enables Doetsch employees to perform their jobs faster and minimize downtime for industrial clients.

Here are two of Doetsch Industrial’s four vacuum trucks.



keep you busy for a day, but for a long-term business model, that’s not part of it.” Joe would rather build a reputation on longevity and service.

Doetsch also improves customer service by keeping abreast of equipment innovations.

In addition, once the company commits to a job, employees stay at it until the work is done. “Through that customer service, we get referrals and that’s a big plus,” Joe says. “That’s when you know you are doing the job you are supposed to do.”

### SAFE WORKPLACES

Keeping jobsites safe begins with a thorough survey of job conditions. Safety begins with a full day of training for new hires, and employee training is periodically updated.

Doetsch ensures a fully trained staff through 40 hours of annual HAZMAT training that includes eight hours of HAZWOPER updates. Employees are also trained in fall arrest, back safety, confined-space entry, atmospheric testing and rescue, MSDS sheets, lock-out/tagout, personal protective equipment, foot protection, safety harness

fit and use, and respiratory protection.

Confined space safety is Joe’s top safety concern. Each employee is issued personal protection equipment, including half-face and full-face respirators and safety harnesses. “Each employee has his own, so they take care of them because they are going to put the same one on tomorrow,” Joe says.

A crucial factor in safety is communication. Employees use equipment such as two-way radios and voice-activated radio headsets. These allow a job supervisor to communicate with the office immediately if there is a problem. “You can buy a host of safety devices, but if you don’t have people who are willing to observe changing job conditions and make changes, those devices are irrelevant,” Joe says.

Voice-activated radio headsets are used frequently during underground televising and cleaning, which may be taking place far away from the truck. With the headsets, operators do not have to stop and walk from the job to the truck to communicate.

“That’s been a big plus in terms of enhancing safety and productivity at

the same time,” Joe says. “The headsets are definitely helpful. You don’t have to scream and use hand signals.”

He cites an example of what can happen when the headsets are not used: “The other day we were out digging, and I told the worker to dig so far and stop,” says Joe. “He didn’t hear me correctly. We should have been wearing the headsets because we were working so far away from the equipment, but because of the noise there, he didn’t hear. He started to work past the designated point, and I had to get him to stop.”

Another safety concern is weather. Doetsch offers employees a choice of coveralls or overcoats, plus full weather gear. “They need to stay warm because if they are sick, they are not bringing income in for themselves or the company,” Joe says. In summer, the company sends water coolers out with the employees. Management also accepts that production will be slower in hot weather.

High employee retention also helps the company stay safe. “Our jobs always have people on them who have done something like that before, so

**“WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING FOR IS TO BE ABLE TO REINVEST IN YOUR COMPANY, SO YOU CAN KEEP YOUR MACHINES IN TOP RUNNING ORDER, CONTINUE TO INNOVATE AND LOOK FOR NEW TECHNOLOGY TO BRING INTO YOUR ARSENAL.”**

**Joe Schotthoefer**

they can coach the other people in terms of safety and awareness,” Joe says.

### COST COMPETITIVENESS

The Doetsch core value of cost competitiveness relates to customer satisfaction.

“There is truth in the statement that cheap isn’t always the best and in the old adage, ‘You get what you pay for,’” Joe says. “Cost competitiveness, in terms of efficiency and the end result, is what we are looking for.”



Left, a mass excavation of a pit was required for this pipe-repair job. Below, the Doetsch Industrial team makes an emergency response to clean up a diesel fuel spill.







Above, hydroexcavation for a subsurface utility easement. Right, hydroexcavation for a sonotube installation.

Cost competitiveness also ties in to customer communications. "They've got this job they'd like us to do for them, so we'll ask for their timeline and what parts we can put together," says Joe. "Maybe we can save them money by doing just one mobilization. Being cost-competitive means looking for ways to help the customer and help set up the job so we can be more effective when we are onsite. It's working with them so both of us are getting the most for our money."

With plant closings in the Midwest, Joe notes that more service companies are competing for pieces of a smaller pie. In particular, some companies that have become accustomed to depending on the automotive sector are afraid to leave it.

As a consequence, service companies' margins in that sector have declined severely. "It's driving the price down to a point where if you can bill enough to pay your workers and maybe put some fuel in the trucks, that's about it," Joe says. "In the meantime, you're not repairing your equipment properly, and you're not able to be as efficient as you want to be.

"When it comes to weathering these storms, that goes back to relationships with the customers. We've worked with our customers long enough to understand their needs so that we can hold onto these accounts. What you are looking for is to be able to reinvest in your company, so you can keep your machines in top running order, continue to innovate and look for new technology to bring into your arsenal."

#### HIGH EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT

Employees have a great deal to say about how Doetsch Industrial does business. Joe likes to be closely involved with jobs so that he can understand how the work is going and communicate well with employees. He encourages an open-ended exchange of ideas on problems they encounter and how the equipment is performing.

"Nobody is an expert at everything," Joe says. "Knowing what to do

**"WE'RE ALWAYS LOOKING AT WAYS TO ENHANCE OUR SERVICES, AND THAT INCLUDES TAKING ON WORK THAT'S SIMILAR TO WHAT WE ALREADY DO, WITHOUT REINVENTING THE WHEEL."**

**Joe Schotthoefer**



the next day," he says. "We try to treat our employees as fairly as possible."

#### CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Continuous improvement is essential to Doetsch operations. It means visiting industry trade shows to see new equipment and to network with other operators. "We're always looking at ways to enhance our services, and that includes taking on work that's similar to what we already do, without reinventing the wheel," Joe says.

Joe carefully monitors jobsites to see whether workers are doing tasks that are needlessly repetitive or are taking too much time. He believes the key to doing business is to do more with less effort. For example, the company developed a remote hose system for one of its trucks.

"We had a problem when we were going long distances and using heavy hose with people hurting their backs," Joe says. "It wasn't productive. So now we've put a boom on the truck, and we're able to drive to wherever our people need to work. Now we've got something more automated that offers more production, plus less strain on the workers. We don't have to worry about back injuries."

#### NEW GENERATIONS

As he moves the business ahead, Joe says his greatest challenge is being involved in a fifth-generation family business, where different generations have different ways of dealing with change. Communication is the key to addressing that.

"Communication trains you to do a lot of fact-finding and researching before you come out with an idea," he says. "Things are done much more cautiously that way than if everyone in the company were the same age."

Challenges come and go, and economies change, but Doetsch Industrial Services rolls on. By adhering to the company's five core values, Joe expects to remain able to adapt and to continue delivering the quality services customers demand. ■

A Doetsch crew and equipment are shown on the site of a siphon pumping and cleaning project.

